

Days by DeutchRemy

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Summary:

The story of Hopper and El, beginning the day he brings her to the cabin. Total adorable fluff. [This is a REPOST (heavily EDITED and expanded) of my fic of the same name that I have since deleted.] P.S. Reviews are like crack for me - please be my dealer!

1. Day 001

Day 001

I open my eyes to a darkened room. The sun is setting. I check my watch. 6:15P. The TV is still on, the light flickering gently through the cabin, but the sound is almost all the way down. There's a pair of tiny feet pressed up against my left thigh. I look over at the kid; she'd started off curled up on the other end of the couch but has gradually unfurled herself and stretched out in her sleep. She's on her right side, her back to the TV set, face pressed into the cushions on the back of the couch. She's freshly bathed and smells like generic dandruff shampoo (it was the only stuff I had) and a miniature bar of hotel soap that I had swiped years ago and which had somehow ended up sitting unopened in the cabin bathroom drawer ever since.

Her left thumb is in her mouth and she's nursing contentedly on it. It was a habit that Diane had been determined to break Sarah of but that I let slide; even in my daughter's last months on earth she only sucked her thumb in front of me, despite my wife's insistence, when it became obvious that Sarah wasn't going to make it, that it was okay. I push the memory away and focus on the now, because it's in the now that there's a different little girl who needs me to care for her.

The girl in question stretches her legs a bit more, pushing her toes into my thigh, and I examine her feet as best I can in the light of the TV. They're a bit pink but aside from abrasions on each Achilles' tendon and pinkie toes that were rubbed raw on the sides, they don't look too bad now that they're clean. They look like they itch like crazy, though; I'll have to keep an eye on her, make sure she's not scratching them too much.

Two hours earlier

"Alright kid, no more cleaning for today." I take the broom from her hand. "It's getting late. Almost time for dinner, actually. But, uh, I think you should take a bath before we eat." She looks sleepy and I fear all the cleaning has worn her out. I'd have saved it all for tomorrow but was worried about bringing this child into a dust-

covered environment.

I realize my mistake when the kid's previously-heavy-lidded eyes widen and she looks up at me, a mixture of confusion and anxiety on her face.

"Shit. I mean, uh, not shit. Shit's a bad word, okay?" I rub a hand down my face. "Kid, what I meant was I think it's time you got yourself clean. How-how did you get clean in the lab?"

She's still looking up at me with those big doe eyes. "Um...show-shower?"

"Okay, well here's the thing. I had to throw the shower curtain away cuz it was covered in black mold. You know what mold is, icky smelly stuff that's bad if you breathe it in?"

The poor, confused child just shrugs her shoulders slowly, the anxiety lingering in her brown eyes. Of course. The kid grew up in a sterile environment. Doubtful that she knows what mold is, let alone the black kind.

"Well you can't take a shower without a shower curtain or else the water's gonna go all over the floor, make a mess."

"Mess." She repeats.

"Exactly. So I'm gonna need for you to take a bath. Just for tonight, okay? Tomorrow I'll buy a new shower curtain so you can take showers from now on. Sound good?"

El looks uncertain but nods anyway, averting her gaze. "Yes."

"Okay, good girl." I give her a light pat on the head.

She follows me into the bathroom and stands on the tiles as I sit down on the rim of the tub and begin turning knobs. They squeak but they move relatively easily; I'd anticipated the kid taking a bath and decided, in the middle of our cleaning spree, to scrub the tub down with bleach, not comfortable with the idea of her sitting down on potentially-moldy porcelain and god knows what else.

As the tub fills I open my luggage bags and begin pulling out articles of clothing that she's going to absolutely swim in but that will have to do until I can get to a store. I decide on an XXL long-sleeve NYPD shirt that she can wear as a dress of sorts. I fold it neatly and return to the bathroom, placing it on the toilet lid. The kid's still just standing there, staring blankly at the tub as it fills up slowly, biting her nails loudly, almost aggressively. I'll try to put a stop to that habit in the future, but for now I'm gonna let her down whatever she finds comforting lest I scare her off.

"You know," I say, moving past her and sitting on the rim of the tub again, "most people really like taking baths. Kids take them all the time. Outside of the lab, baths are a good thing." I reach out a hand to her and she tentatively takes it after a moment. "Adults take baths because we enjoy them." She sits on the edge of the tub next to me. "We find them relaxing. You remember Joyce? She loves taking baths."

"I...see Joyce?" Her eyes look hopeful now at the mention of the first woman to ever show her affection.

"Not yet, kid. Soon, though." I dunk my hand in the water and swish it around. "Why don't you put your hand in and see if the temperature feels good? See, do like me."

El runs the tips of her fingers through the water then says simply "Good."

"Yeah? Not too hot, not too cold?"

"Good." She repeats, nodding her head.

"Alright, kiddo," I turn the knobs to stop the flow of water, then stand, "I'll leave you to it. If you need anything, anything at all, just yell, okay?"

"O-okay."

She calls me in five minutes later. She's still sitting on the edge of the tub, still fully-clothed, with tears streaming down her face. I don't know what she's crying about, but my heart breaks nonetheless.

“Hey hey, what’s the matter? What’re the tears for, huh?”

She says nothing, pointing to her left shoe. She managed to undo the massive knot that was holding the laces together and seems to have loosened it a bit but doesn’t appear to have gotten any further. I understand why when I, unthinking, grab the shoe and begin to tug it off, and the poor kid screams bloody murder.

“Sorrysorrysorry!” I place her foot back on the floor and rethink my attack. I loosen the shoe even further, going so far as to completely remove the laces, and she sobs as I manage to slide it easily off her foot. She puts her hands on my shoulders to steady herself as I get to work on the other one.

Her once-white socks are completely filthy, covered in dirt and blood. As I pull the socks off of her feet, scabs come off with them. The kid whimpers but it’s probably for the best that the wounds reopen so I can clean them properly. I feel horrible - I’d just left her in here on her own, assuming she’d want privacy, not realizing just how much care she needs.

“I’m so sorry, kid.” I say, guiltily, “You want me to stay?”

She nods immediately, her face crumpling as her eyes well up with fresh tears. There’s a look of relief on her face, too, as though my offer to stay removed from her the burden of having to request it. “Alright, kid. If you change your mind, though, just tell me and I’ll leave, yeah? Cuz baths are supposed to be private things, okay?” She continues to cry but gives a silent nod. I rub her back soothingly. “It’s okay, just relax. I’m gonna take care of you.”

I inspect the rest of her feet. They’re warm to the touch and a splotchy bright pink. Not in the healthy, pink-toed, good-circulation way, but in the “holy shit this kid has trench foot” way. It looks mild, though; a good scrubbing should take care of it. I’m more concerned with making sure the wounds on her Achilles from shoe abrasion don’t get infected.

She slowly removes the flannel I put on her last month and sets it down carefully on the floor. She stands up on shaky, painful feet and faces away from me so I can unzip the dirty pink dress for her. She sheds it, then her underpants, which, despite being torn in the back,

seem to have remained the cleanest, not having been exposed to the elements, and both items join the ruined socks in the small trashcan.

She's thin, though not alarmingly so, and has little bruises scattered along her arms and legs, and a healing scrape on her right knee.

She's hesitant now. She doesn't want to dip her raw and painful feet into that hot water. She's gonna scream, we both know it, but she needs to get in if we're gonna get them clean.

"El?"

She makes a small sound in her throat. It's not a word, just a nervous little noise.

I'm at war with myself. Torn between just picking her up and plopping her into the water vs letting her get in on her own time, risking her possibly not getting in at all. On the one hand I know that she must get into that bathtub, especially now that I know her feet are infections waiting to happen. On the other hand this poor kid is traumatized and has never been given any choices regarding any aspect of her life.

So I wait. It takes a few minutes but El eventually picks a foot off of the bathmat, hesitates, then puts it back down again.

"El? Want me to help you get in? It might be easier, yeah?"

She considers this, probably contemplating just how long she wants to be standing butt naked in a bathroom with a man she barely knows, then nods slowly and takes a deep breath, as if preparing herself for the scream she knows will come out of her mouth as soon as her ankles hit the hot water.

"Alright, here we go." From behind her I hook my hands under her armpits and lift her up and over the rim of the tub, sitting her down with a loud plunk.

She doesn't scream, but she gasps loudly, and then sits there hugging her knees as I rub a hand between her shoulder blades and murmur soothing nothings.

"You're okay, kid...it'll stop stinging in a minute...just try to relax..."

I'm reminded of trying to comfort her with Joyce when she was floating in the kiddie pool. How she briefly grabbed my fingers in her tiny hand when she located Barb's corpse. How she trusted me enough to grab onto me as though I were her father. How I betrayed that trust by revealing her location to Brenner.

I push the memory away and concentrate on getting this girl clean.

She doesn't seem to give a damn about me seeing her naked. Clearly she wasn't taught modesty at the lab, just like she wasn't taught how to read, how to write, how to speak, or how to eat with a knife and fork. Once she's healthier and more capable of bathing herself I'm gonna have a talk with her about what's appropriate and what's not. Maybe she'll become naturally more modest once she goes through puberty - so far tiny breast buds are the only outward sign, which is a relief because I am not ready to be explaining periods or body hair or boys to a scared kid who barely even knows the alphabet.

I pull the only bottle of shampoo out from under the sink. It's dandruff shampoo and it's at least ten years old. I unscrew the cap and sniff it. Smells fine. I give it a good shake then squirt a healthy dollop onto my palm. I begin to smear it onto the kid's head and she startles then looks at me as if to say "What on earth...?" It hits me, then. She's never washed her hair. Because she's never had hair to wash. I could slap myself for being so dense.

"It's okay, kid. This is called shampoo. It's for washing your hair. I know it smells a bit yucky because it's a special kind of shampoo, but tomorrow when I go to the store I'm gonna pick out some really nice-smelling ones for you, yeah?"

She's tentatively reaching up towards her head and running the tips of her fingers through her lathered hair. "Sham-shampoo?"

"Yeah, shampoo. Tell you what, how about I teach you one new word every day? How's that sound? Today's word can be shampoo, yeah? You wanna try rubbing it in? You're gonna need to get the hang of this so you can do it yourself." I swish my hands around in the bathwater for a second to get the suds off. "Atta girl, you got it." This earns me a small smile, and I may as well have just won a gold medal. She tires of the activity quickly, so I get my hands back in there and really massage the stuff into her hair. She winces a bit as I

make sure to scrape my fingernails along her scalp, and I apologize, but she's got a month's worth of grease and dead skin to remove. "Alright, next we rinse all that out. I should have a cup or something down here somewhere..." I rummage around under the sink and retrieve a small beat-up stainless steel pan.

As soon as I touch it I'm assaulted by a memory of my own dad rinsing my hair with this very pan when I was about five. The memory is so vivid I can almost smell the warm, late-summer breeze coming in through the window, almost hear the leaves on the trees rustling...I snap myself out of the memory and focus on the kid in the tub. "So you dip it in the water, see, and then - tilt your head back and close your eyes, kid - pour it over your hair to get all the suds out. You don't have much hair right now but as it grows you'll need to use more water to get all the shampoo out. Now, let me see those feet."

She hesitates, keeping her feet below the water, staring into my eyes. I don't think she wants me touching them. I can't blame her - they look painful as hell.

"I'm just gonna wash them for you, kid. I'll be gentle, I promise. Can I see them?"

Her eyes linger on mine a second more before she produces her left foot for me. I take it gently, cupping her heel in my palm, and I take a moment to inspect it more closely than I'd been able to before. Five pink toes, all look fine except for the blistered pinkie. I turn the toes up to get a look at the sole of the foot, which is pinker than it should be, likely irritation from trench foot combined with friction from walking. There's the abrasion on the back of her ankle, and there's also a blister on her heel that I hadn't noticed earlier; it looks like it's popped, drained, filled back up, then popped again multiple times.

I put her left foot back in the water for the time being and perform the same inspection on the right one. Her feet are like mirror images of one another, the injuries practically identical.

"Alright, kid, I'm gonna wash your feet, okay? And uh, it's probably gonna hurt, but just bear with me, cuz if we don't get them cleaned they're gonna get infected, and that could make you very sick."

"Sick?" She tilts her head to the side like a curious dog.

Has this kid never been sick before?

"Yeah, sick, like throwing up and fever and all that stuff."

She still looks confused.

"Well anyway, it's bad, take my word for it."

"Sick is bad."

"Exactly, which is why I'm gonna clean your feet, okay?"

"Okay."

I unwrap a bar of soap and get her feet sudsy then scrub them with a washcloth, being sure to get between the toes and the backs of her ankles. She cries as I do this, as I figured she would, and I do my best to reassure her that it'll be over soon, it'll be over soon, but it doesn't erase my guilt over causing this poor child more pain. I toss the washcloth into the hamper and grab a clean one, then scrub her shoulders and her back until they're clean and pink. I rinse off the washcloth and hand it and the bar of soap to the kid.

"I want you to scrub your entire body now, okay? Everywhere."

She does as told, and when she's finished she looks exhausted, leaving the washcloth to sink to the bottom of the tub. Her eyelids are heavy and drooping and she looks ready to nod off right there.

"What do you say I get you out and we have some dinner, yeah?" She looks a little more awake at the suggestion of food, but not much. She nods and moves so slowly, as if her arms are made of jello, to put her hand on the edge of the tub. "No no, kid, I'm gonna help you." I'm not about to have this kid slip and fall on her first day with me. I push up my sleeves and reach into the water to find her armpits, pulling her out of the tub accompanied by a cascade of water, standing her up on the bathmat. I forgot how slippery naked kids are; they're like eels. I'm assaulted by another memory, then, of Sarah in her last days, so sick she was being given sponge baths instead of real baths...

Don't go there, Hop. I push the memory down and yank a towel off the shelf, wrapping it twice around the little girl who's currently shivering and dripping in front of me.

As I rub her arms and back to dry her off she moves forward and leans her head on my chest, and my heart catches in my throat. It's been five years, five long, painful, lonely years since a little girl did that to me. Oh god, I will not cry. I will not cry. Instead I wrap her in my arms and give her the hug that she's needed for the past twelve years.

My shirt works great as a dress but her little legs must be cold. I pulled a pair of my smallest sweatpants all the way up to her waist but they were so baggy she could hardly walk, and after two steps they fell in a puddle at her feet, so we abandoned the idea. We'll figure something out. I offer her my hand and she takes it, wrapping all five of her fingers around my index. We walk into the kitchen.

"Go and sit down at the table, okay?" I give her a tiny nudge and watch as she hoists herself up onto one of the chairs. I walk into the living room and pull an afghan off of the couch, returning to the kitchen and draping it over the kid's legs. "How's that? Warm?"

She nods and gives me a tiny, shy smile, then "Thank...you."

"No need to thank me, kid. My job is to look after you now, alright?"

"Alright."

"Good, now you sit tight here and I'm gonna see what we have for dinner."

I begin rummaging through cabinets, hoping to find something edible. I find a can of condensed tomato soup and a can of mixed vegetables. By some miracle both are just two months away from their expiration date. I inspect the cans for dents, rust, or bloating before cranking them open and dumping the contents into two pans.

I periodically glance over at the kid as I stir the pots on the stove. She's slouched in her chair, kicking her legs back and forth a bit, and has resumed biting her nails. Despite the anxiety, though, she seems

to be fighting sleep.

I bring the contents of both pans to a boil - something you're not supposed to do but I'm being extra careful not to get this kid sick. At the last second I decide to just add the vegetables directly to the tomato soup. Fewer dishes to clean.

She looks suspicious as I set the bowls down on the table. I pick up her spoon and place it into her hand then give her a quick demo on how to use it.

"I know how." She says simply, and tentatively samples the soup. Apparently she likes it, because her bowl is empty in two minutes, save for a handful of peas that she left at the bottom.

"How 'bout you try the peas?" I suggest.

"I did. Not good."

"They're good for you, though, even if they don't taste good."

She pushes her bowl over to me. "You eat?"

"Well I'd rather see you eat them but I'm not gonna force you to eat something you don't want, so yeah, I'll eat them tonight but I want you to at least try them again next time. Yeah?"

She looks relieved and pushes her bowl further towards me. I take it and finish off the peas, making a show of it, trying to make it seem like they're delicious, but she doesn't fall for it. Kid's not dumb, that's for sure.

I bundle her up in blankets on the couch and put the TV on for her, then begin to wash the dishes. When I finish she's asleep, curled up on one end, so I sit down on the other end and turn the volume down until I can barely make out what's being said. It's not long before I drift off, myself.

The kid stirs and wakes up from her couch slumber, yawning then looking at me with sleepy eyes. She looks very cozy in her blanket cocoon.

"Hey, I think it's bedtime, what do you say?"

"Bedtime."

"Sure is. C'mon, time for you to break in your new bed."

She looks startled, confused, and a bit upset. "Break? No...don't want to break the bed..."

"No no, kid, not actually break it, it's just an expression. Uh, something people say. You're not gonna break your bed. Now c'mon." I offer her my hand and pull her to her feet. She sways slightly and clutches the blankets around her.

I pull down the freshly-washed covers for her.

"Alright, climb in."

She does so, somewhat tentatively, putting both hands and one knee on the mattress and hoisting herself up.

"Nice and warm?" I ask, pulling the blankets over her. She nods and gives me a tiny smile.

"Warm."

"Good. Now, you can sleep as long as you want to, okay? Get the rest you deserve. I'm gonna be in the living room. If you need anything - anything at all, any time of night - you come get me, okay? Or just shout for me and I'll come, got it?"

She snuggles down into the blankets but still doesn't look completely relaxed. She nods anyway.

"Okay, you sleep tight, kid." I give her short hair a quick ruffle. "I'll see you in the morning."

I stand up and turn off her light and have the door halfway shut when she says "Don't."

I freeze. "You don't want me to shut the door?"

She shakes her head vigorously.

"Okay, do you want me to leave it like this? Halfway open, halfway shut?"

"Yes."

"You got it, kid."

I head into the kitchen and begin pulling open drawers. There's gotta be a notepad and pen around here somewhere. I find a notepad - coffee-stained, no less - easily but have to keep rummaging before I locate a pen that's not dried up. Finally I sit down at the table and begin to write:

Eleven El

Likes:

- Eggs (no shit)
- maple syrup
- butter
- tomato soup
- corn
- skim milk (buy whole milk)
- baby carrots
- bubblebaths
- hugs

Dislikes:

- peas

Shopping list:

- Eggs
- whipped cream
- juice (see if they have stuff with no extra sugar)
- bread (whole wheat if possible)
- TV dinners
- canned soup
- hot cocoa mix
- cheese (the kind to make grilled cheese with)
- whole milk
- Eggs

- frozen and fresh veg.
- eggs
- cereal
- oatmeal
- clothing (UNDERPANTS and socks., shirts, pants, pjs, note: check shoes to see if needs new pair)
- kid stuff (toys, teddy bear, games, books, coloring books, crayons)
- medicine cabinet shit (thermometer, tylenol, cough medicine...)

To be continued

2. Day 002

Day 002

“Hey, sleepyhead.” I say as Eleven finally makes an appearance. She’s shuffling out of her bedroom, rubbing at her eyes, my shirt hanging off her slight form.

This kid just slept for 14 hours straight. Under any other circumstances I’d be concerned, but this little girl spent the last month living in the woods so I figure she’s entitled to catch up on missing sleep.

“Sleep okay?” I ask gently, though I already know the answer - I peeked in on her multiple times during the night and she was passed out hard. I think she may have shifted positions once. Had the rise and fall of her chest not been visible from the doorway I probably would have feared the worst. She didn’t even wake when I draped another blanket across her still form.

She responds with a quiet “Yes” but doesn’t look me in the eye. She’s still a bit shy. She trusts me, though (at least I think she does) which is what really matters.

“Why don’t you hit the bathroom and then come join me for breakfast?”

She frowns and slaps the wall with her palm. “H-hit the bathroom?”

“I mean go pee, kid. You haven’t gone in what, 14 hours? That’s probably a record. Go on while I plate up these Eggos, okay?”

“Okay.” El turns around and heads into the bathroom. The toilet flushes a minute later and I hear the sink running. She emerges just as I’m setting the plates on the kitchen table.

“C’mon, let’s eat.”

She climbs up onto her chair as I sit down in my own. It creaks under my weight. I reach across the table and pick up her fork and knife, cutting her Eggos into bite-size pieces. She watches me intently.

When I'm finished I spear one piece on the end of the fork and hand the utensil to her.

She eats it with gusto before awkwardly adjusting the fork into her other hand and tentatively spearing another piece.

"Try some syrup." I use my own fork to slide the waffle pieces to the right side of her plate and pour a tiny puddle of syrup onto the left side. "Just dip a piece in. I think you'll like it."

Her face lights up as soon as she tastes it. "Good?" I ask and she nods her head enthusiastically. I chuckle. "Yeah? Want some more? Most people pour it on top of the waffles." I demonstrate on my own and then hand her the bottle. "You can have as much as you want."

"Thank you." She smiles up at me and I realize then that I'll give anything just to see her do that again.

I can't help but watch as she happily devours her breakfast, so I notice right away when she stops eating and puts her fork down halfway through her plate.

"You full?"

She shrugs and just sort of looks at me with her big eyes before speaking. "Um...cold."

Shit. I forgot her legs and feet were bare. Poor thing's probably freezing her little butt off. I stand up and move into the living room, pulling the afghan off the back of the couch.

"Stand up, just for a second." The afghan is small; I wrap it around her waist so it shields her legs from the draft in the kitchen. "Warmer?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Alright, now finish your breakfast, okay? I'm gonna get ready to go out."

She looks concerned and stops chewing. "Out?"

“Yeah, kid, I’m not working today but I gotta go out to the store to pick us up a few things. We need more Eggos and other food - healthy food - and you need some clothes. You, uh, you think you’ll be okay without me for a couple hours?”

She stares at me for a few seconds and I have a sudden illogical fear that I may have broken her, overloaded her with too many words at once, but she finally speaks.

“Here...al-alone?” She’s frowning, clearly unsure of what I’m proposing. I scratch the back of my head.

“Uh, yeah, just for a couple hours, though, and then I’ll be back and we can watch some TV together, yeah?”

She still looks very hesitant but gives me a shaky “Okay.”

“Yeah?” I reach across the table and take her hand in mine gently, rubbing my thumb across her knuckles. “How about while I’m gone you watch some TV yourself and try to decide what the best channel is so we know what to watch later. Think you can do that?”

This time I only get a nod, but it’s better than nothing.

I go into the bathroom to change my clothes and find her on the couch when I emerge. Her eyes are fixed on the TV and her blanket-covered knees are drawn up to her chest. I duck into her room and strip one of the extra blankets off of her bed.

She startles a bit when I drape the blanket over her shoulders and sit next to her.

“Okay, I don’t know exactly how long this will take me because I need to go to a few different stores and I can’t shop in Hawkins, but I’m gonna try to make it back in no more than four hours. So when that clock over there says four-three-zero is when I’m gonna try to make it back by, if I’m not back sooner. That sound okay? Kid?”

She nods mutely into her knees. I briefly consider canning it, going out tomorrow for supplies, but tomorrow I’m expected at the station. It has to be today. This poor kid needs warm clothes that fit her. Pajamas. Underpants, for God’s sake.

"Everything's gonna be okay, kid, alright? Make sure you lock the door behind me and radio if you need to."

"Bad men."

"They're not gonna find you, I promise, and if they do, I will make them very, very sorry." I pick up the remote control and flip the channels a bit, finding a cartoon and leaving it on. "Watch some cartoons, okay?"

I return ahead of schedule and stomp the snow from my boots on the porch after the kid undoes the locks. When I step inside, laden down with bags, she smiles bigger than I've seen her smile, her descending canines on full display.

I set the bags on the kitchen counter and begin removing items. She watches me as I do so, looking like she wants to help but not sure how. I'll let her help out tomorrow if she wants - she has that weary look in her eyes that screams exhaustion, despite her lengthy sleep last night.

So she continues to watch in wonder as I remove items from the bags. More Eggos, a box of plain and a box of blueberry. A can of whipped cream. A tub of Neapolitan ice cream. M&Ms. A jar of maraschino cherries. Hot fudge sauce. I'm gonna teach her how to make ice cream sundaes for dessert tonight, hoping the treat will be a good apology for leaving her alone today.

Next comes the boring stuff. Whole wheat bread. Cold cuts. Milk. Butter. Juice. Cereal. Coffee. Mayo and mustard. Peanut butter. Jelly. Paper towels. Toilet paper. Dish soap. New sponges.

Everything goes in its place. Afterwards I pick up the remaining bags and lead El over to the couch.

"Got you some stuff, just like I said. C'mon, sit."

I take each item out of the bag one at a time. First and maybe most important - underpants. A ten pack of girls' Hanes in pink, purple, and white with blue butterflies.

"Pretty." She says, likely in awe that underpants come in colors other

than white.

“Yeah, they’re pretty. But you understand that they’re only for you to find pretty, right? Once the dust settles and you’re able to go out in the world, I don’t want you showing these to boys, not even your little friends, okay? Underpants are a private thing. Got it?”

“Got it.” She mimics.

“Good. Now,” I reach into the bag, “Pajamas. Clothes that you sleep in.” I bought two matching sets - long-sleeved tops and bottoms - one pair with tiny little Snoopy and Woodstocks and the other a bit more feminine with tiny pink and purple flowers.

Socks come out of the bag next, and I help El slide a pair on right away. Then comes a few shirts and sweatshirts, a pair of overalls, sweatpants, and several pairs of jeans.

Last out of the bag is a teddy bear that she takes tentatively, as though she’s worried it’ll break, as I hand it to her. She examines its eyes, its nose, its ears, then hugs it gently to her chest.

“Thank you.” She smiles sweetly at me.

“Anything for you, kid. Now why don’t you try on the clothes? Anything that’s too small I’ll take back and anything that’s too big we’ll wait for you to grow into.”

Turns out I estimated her size perfectly for everything except the underpants, although they’re only just a tad too big; she can still wear them, they’ll just be a bit baggy in the butt for a while. The pajamas she’s absolutely smitten with; she wears the Snoopy ones for the rest of the day.

I was right about the exhaustion; after dinner we sit on the couch together, watching an old movie that she doesn’t understand, and although it’s only 6 pm I notice her nodding off.

“Lie down, kid.” I tell her gently, and she immediately does just that. She’s asleep within two minutes.

3. Day 090

Summary for the Chapter:

Hey guys, it's me! Just want to let you know that from now on this story is going to jump back and forth in time! I'm too impatient to think of stuff for Hopper and El to do on day 003, day 004, day 005, etc, and I also don't enjoy writing them as much during the super early days when El is probably skittish around Hopper. Granted, those days certainly need to be filled in, but it's more fun for me to write Hopper and El after the first few months have passed, when he likely started viewing her as his daughter. I plan to fill in the gaps as ideas come to me, so don't be surprised if one chapter is day 085, the next chapter is day 010, and the following chapter is day 290.

Day 090

I wake up at god knows what hour when I feel something against my back. I'm still half in a dream and at first think it's my childhood German shepherd, Elroy, until I become fully conscious and remember I have a little girl, not a dog, living with me.

Too comfortable to roll over I feel behind me with my hand. I feel a pajama-clad arm and, when I move my hand further to the right, a curly head of hair. Yep, child, not dog.

She's pressed herself against my back, seemingly as close as she possibly can, and is shivering violently. At first I assume she's seeking extra warmth due to the extreme cold snap we're in the middle of; the daytime temperature hasn't risen above 15 degrees F for a week. Then I notice the sheer amount of heat radiating off her body.

I roll over, then, and she instantly pushes her way into my chest, resting her head near my collarbone and resuming her shivering.

“S’matter, kid, you don’t feel well?”

She doesn’t respond.

“Hey, c’mon, kiddo. Whassa matter?”

“Cold.”

“Yeah?”

“And...hurt.”

“Hurt? Hurt where?”

“Here.” She rubs her forehead. “And here.” She rubs her belly over the blankets. “And...everywhere. And...cold.” She repeats, indicating the chills are bothering her more than anything else.

“Yeah, I’m not surprised, kid, you’re burning up.” I remark as I place the back of my hand against her forehead, then her cheeks. “Yep, you got a fever. Lemme up so I can get the thermometer.”

She whines as I pull the blankets back so I can get out of bed. She shivers even more violently than before, and curls up into a ball. I can see that every muscle in her body is rippling, working overtime in an attempt to keep her warm, so I replace the blanket as quickly as I can and add the afghan from the back of the couch for good measure.

As I pad to the bathroom I wonder how she suddenly got so sick. She seemed totally normal at dinner and even ate her vegetables. Why the hell do kids have to get sick in the middle of the night? Do they do it on purpose or something? It’s scary enough for parents to have a sick child in the light of day. My anxiety ramps up when I remember that this particular child is more like a toddler when it comes to her vocabulary, and might not be able to adequately convey how she’s feeling or what certain pains feel like.

I grab the thermometer from the drawer in the bathroom and pluck the bottle of Tylenol from the medicine cabinet, giving it a quick shake so I know there’s pills inside.

I return to my cot to find El on her side, exactly as I left her, still shaking violently.

“Can you turn over, kiddo, onto your back?” I ask, sitting down on the edge of the mattress as I shake the thermometer down.

“Cold.”

“I know you’re cold, sweetie pie, but I gotta know what your temperature is, okay? It’ll be quick. C’mon.” I place a hand on her shoulder to ease her over onto her back. “Alright, open your mouth. Good girl, now lift your tongue. Now close your mouth and don’t move. You gotta stay perfectly still or we won’t get an accurate reading.”

She’s surprisingly cooperative, staying perfectly still as she lies there waiting for me to take the thermometer out of her mouth. I yawn twice before realizing I’m probably making her want to copy me. Her eyes keep fluttering shut for several seconds before reopening; she’s tired. With any luck she’ll be able to sleep this thing off after I’ve gotten some Tylenol into her.

I look at my watch and remove the thermometer. 103.2. Shit.

“Be right back.” I tell her as I stand up and move into the kitchen. I fill a glass - her favorite glass with the butterflies - with water and set it on the coffee table for a moment. I open the bottle of Tylenol and shake out two tablets into my palm, then pick the glass of water back up. “Sit up, just a bit, okay? Just enough so you can swallow these and not choke.”

She complies and hesitantly takes the pills from my hand. “Put those on your tongue...good girl...now take a nice big sip of water.” I hold the glass to her lips and tip it to deliver just enough water for her to safely swallow the pills.

She grimaces as the pills go down, and I’m not sure if her throat hurts or she just doesn’t like swallowing pills.

“Good girl.” I ruffle her hair gently and she reaches both arms out towards me. Dammit. I’d been hoping to get her back into her own

bed but the child looks so pitiful right now. I sit on the edge of the cot and hug her, rubbing her back and wondering what I'm gonna do. I have an idea. "Alright, kiddo. How about I let you stay in my bed until your fever goes down, then you go back to your bed and I'll read you a chapter of Charlotte's Web?"

"Okay."

The cot is just too damn small for both of us, so while El curls back up under my comforter I putter around, pulling extra blankets from the closet for her bed, making a shopping list of "sick kid supplies" - Sprite, Children's Tylenol, jello, soup, saltines, popsicles, Vick's Vapor Rub, Pepto Bismol, movies on VHS, junk food for when she feels better, etc.

When her fever breaks and she kicks the blankets off I get her up and get her settled in her own bed. I pull her comforter up to her chest, but she complains and pushes it with her feet to the end of the bed.

"No? Too warm?"

She nods so I fold the comforter and the other blankets up at the foot of the bed so she can easily pull the back over herself when she needs them again. I then pull my chair up to her bed and crack open Charlotte's Web.

I wake up to the sound of whimpering. My neck is stiff and my hand completely numb. I open my eyes and realize I fell asleep in the chair next to El's bed, my neck bent at an odd angle and my right hand still holding the book open against my belly.

The kid is shivering again and seems to be moving her legs around restlessly under the blankets, either lost in a dream or trying in vain to warm herself. I put the book aside and push myself up from the chair, moving over to sit on the edge of her bed.

"No..." She mumbles, and then I notice the movement of her eyeballs under her closed lids. "No." She says again, more forcefully this time, then "Go away!"

She bolts upright in bed, clutching Mr. Bear to her chest, her eyes darting around the room as she takes shallow, panicked breaths.

“Hey hey, it’s okay, kid. I’m here, okay, I’m here.” I place a gentle hand on her back and immediately feel the heat radiating off of it. Clearly her fever has returned, though my concern at the moment is helping her calm down from whatever nightmare she just clawed her way out of. “Slow your breathing, El. You’re safe. I’m here. Just breathe, nice and slow.” I move my hand from her back to her head, petting her curly hair soothingly, and her breathing slowly evens out though her eyes remain wide and alert.

She surprises me when she speaks.

“Bad-bad lady. In bathroom.”

Surely I’ve misheard her.

“What’s that, kiddo?”

“Bad lady. Hurt Benny. I - I saw her in - in the bathroom.”

Okay, I’m creeped out, but I refuse to let her see it.

“You had a nightmare, kid. There’s no lady in the bathroom. Trust me - I was just in the bathroom.” I fib, hoping she’ll buy it. “If there was a lady in there I would have seen her.”

She shifts a bit in bed, then, and gets a bizarre look on her face, as though she’s come to a sudden realization. She looks down at her lap, then up at me, then down at her lap again, and when her eyes meet mine again there are tears welling up in them.

“Sorry...” She whispers, looking ashamed.

“Sorry for what, kiddo? What’s the matter?”

“I, um...” Her lower lip is trembling now.

Then I get it.

I pull the blankets back to reveal a large wet spot spread out

underneath her.

“Sorry.” She repeats, tears running down her face.

“No no, nothing to be sorry for, El. It was an accident. Sometimes kids wet their beds; it happens.”

I stick my hands under her armpits and lift her out of the wet bed. She started shivering violently as soon as I removed the blankets, and now her teeth are chattering noisily. I carry her into the bathroom and set her down on the closed toilet.

“I’m gonna start you a bath, okay? And while the tub’s filling I’m gonna get you a change of underpants and pajamas, then I’ll change your sheets.” I put the stopper in the drain and start the water running. “Go ahead and get undressed, okay?”

She looks up at me, an absolutely miserable look on her face. She’s hunched over on the toilet lid, shivering like nothing I’ve ever seen before, and has resorted to rocking back and forth in a last ditch effort to warm herself. My heart breaks.

“Sweetie, you gotta get out of those wet clothes.” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Yes.”

“No. Too cold.”

“Yeah but you’ll be cold for like five seconds, then you can get in the nice warm bath. I even put bubbles in it for you, look. You love bubbles. And you can have your ducky in there with you.” I open the cabinet under the sink and pull out her rubber ducky, plopping it in the water.

She whines but begins to remove her clothes, albeit at a snail’s pace, and I go back to her room and pull out a clean pair of PJs and underpants. I return to the bathroom to find that she’s barely gotten the shirt over her head.

“My skin hurts.” She tells me as I set the clothes down on the toilet

and pull the shirt the rest of the way off her body, and I recall having the same issue when I had the flu as a teenager. It only happened when my fever was really high, which fortunately wasn't more than once a day, because my skin was so sensitive that my clothing felt like sandpaper.

As gently as possible I get her pants and underpants off and she immediately grabs a towel and wraps it around herself. I feel a rush of relief and pride, thinking that, despite the fact that she's no more developed than she was the first time I helped her bathe, she's finally coming to understand modesty. Then she begs me to let her get back in bed and I realize she's just cold.

"Kid, I still have to change your sheets, so you can't get back in bed yet. And you need to wash yourself off or you'll get a rash on your butt from laying in pee."

"Cold." She says, as though reminding me.

"I know you're cold," I say patiently while I take the towel off of her and lift her into the tub, "But you gotta take a bath, okay. Sit down, bend your knees. C'mon, all the way down, on your butt. Good girl. I promise, once you're in here for a few minutes you won't want to get out. Now you relax in here while I change your bed."

"Don't." She says with fear in her eyes.

"Don't what, kid? Don't change your bed? I gotta change the sheets."

"Don't leave. Please. Bad lady."

Right. I forgot about the nightmare.

"Okay, kid. I'll sit here while you soak for a few minutes, then you can get into your clean pajamas and lie down in my bed while I change your sheets. Would that make you happy?"

"Yes." She gives me a tiny smile but I can still see the anxiety in her eyes.

A half hour later she's back in a clean bed, in clean pajamas, and curled up at my side, her fever temporarily dormant thanks to the

latest dose of Tylenol coursing through her system. She practically bullied me into lying down next to her in her too-small twin bed, looking at me with fearful eyes and making me feel like a monster if I were to make her sleep alone.

Her head is pillowed on my right bicep as I read her a chapter from Charlotte's Web (another thing she bullied me into doing, despite it being nearly 3 AM) and while on any other night she's sound asleep within thirty minutes of reading, her eyes remain open, unfocused, and I can practically feel the anxiety coming off of her in waves. Even the thumb in her mouth seems to provide little comfort to her tonight.

So every so often I curl my arm, the one she's lying on, upwards, and stroke her hair, just to remind her I'm here for her, though I don't think she'll soon forget it.

TBC

4. Chapter 4

Day 091

I call in sick from work. Thankfully Flo is so accustomed to my hangovers that she has no reason to suspect that I'm hiding anything from her.

As much as I hate leaving El alone, I absolutely must stock up on "sick kid" supplies, and unfortunately I can't do that in Hawkins. I drive over an hour away to Terra Haute and frantically look for a pharmacy, not wanting to prolong my time away from her any more than necessary.

I grab all the essentials and decide to surprise her with two more bottles of bubble bath. I'm worried that her nightmare involving the "bad lady" might put her off of bathing; some new bubble scents may entice her back into the tub.

As I head to the register I spot a bin full of bath toys. Jackpot. To my basket I add a rubber ducky wearing a sailor hat, a blue and white toy boat, and a Kermit the Frog bath mitt. Maybe if she has enough tub friends to keep her company she won't need me to stay in the bathroom with her all the time.

I pay for my purchases and as I'm leaving the store I notice that there's a bookstore across the street. I wonder if they have any medical books geared towards parents...

Quick, quick, I tell myself. In and out, then back to El.

It's a small family-owned bookstore but they have a decent section on child rearing. I peruse the shelves:

You And Your Eight-Year-Old

You And Your Nine-Year-Old

A Single Mom's Guide To Raising Boys

The First Five Years

Post-Partum Depression, A Resource Guide

The ABCs Of Breastfeeding

“Can I help you find anything today?” I nearly jump out of my skin at the sweet, feminine voice that appears out of nowhere. You’d think I’d be more used to being sneaked up on by small, quiet females, but apparently not.

“Oh uh yeah uh,” I stumble, trying to find my composure, “Do you have any books on, like, basic medical info for parents? Like fevers, bee stings, that sort of stuff?”

“We do, actually.” She crouches down to the bottom shelf and I crouch with her. “This is our best-seller.” She pulls out a thick blue tome entitled *Your Child’s Health: A Reference Guide For Parents*, Seventh Edition. “This is one of our best-sellers. I have it at home.” She braces the heavy book on her forearm and flips the pages with her other hand. “It’s got everything - fevers, taking temperatures, when to call the doctor, basic first aid, insect bites, stings, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, animal injuries, allergies, asthma, puberty, colds, the flu, you name it, it’s in here...and what’s really handy,” she flips to the back of the book, “is that there are reference tables for everything based on age and gender. Like if you wanna know what a high fever is in an infant versus a five year old, or what height a girl should be by the time she’s ten. I highly recommend it.”

“I’ll take it.”

I walk through the front door, weighed down with bags, and am pounced on by the kid, who wraps all of her limbs around me and practically squeezes me to death.

“Kid...Jesus.” I grunt out, staggering slightly. “El, I know you missed me but you gotta let go, okay, or I’m gonna drop these bags.”

All of a sudden the bags leave my hands of their own volition and float over to the kitchen countertop. I’m left with only the weight of a feverish 12-year-old who I’ve just realized has red, puffy eyes. “Hey hey, kid, what’s the matter, huh? Why you cryin’?” I hold her with one hand and rub her back soothingly with the other.

She doesn't answer me, and I didn't really expect her to; most questions become rhetorical when directed at El. I don't mind, though; to me it's just part of her charm.

I sit on the couch with her and she burrows herself into my unzipped jacket, seeking the warmth emanating from my sweater underneath. I give her a few minutes to calm down and get comfortable before speaking again.

"Wanna talk now, kiddo?" I ask gently, still rubbing her back. "Hmm, tell me what's wrong?"

She's absent-mindedly playing with the button on my jacket's breast pocket so I expect her to ignore the question. Instead, she surprises me.

"You said...you said no work." She continues to fiddle with the button, bringing her left hand up to join in.

"I didn't go to work, just like I promised."

"But...I woke up and couldn't find you." Her lower lip trembles as fresh tears well up in her eyes and roll down her cheeks. "G-gone."

Shit. Big mistake, Hopper. Sure, I told the kid I wasn't going to work, but I didn't tell her I was still leaving for a few hours. The poor thing woke up and probably thought I'd abandoned her, or been taken by the Bad Men.

I lean forward and press my lips to the kid's temple. "El. I am so, so sorry." I apologize from the bottom of my heart, tears welling up in my own eyes. "That was a stupid thing I did. I should have told you I was going to the store. I needed to pick up some stuff to help you get better. But I will never, ever, leave you alone without telling you, okay?"

"Promise?" She squeaks out, tears still rolling down her cheeks.

"Yes, sweetie, I promise."

5. Day 035

Day 035

The kid has a tendency to get into stuff she shouldn't. Now that she's not afraid of me anymore she has the curiosity of a cat.

Just the other day, minutes after she went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, I heard a gasp. I pushed myself up from my seat on the couch and went to investigate, and found her looking nervous, her left hand trembling under cold running water, which was tinged pink. There was blood all over the sink and on my razor, laying abandoned in the basin, too close to her hand for my comfort.

I dropped my newspaper to the floor with a loud "Shit!" and immediately plucked my razor from the sink before she could do herself any more damage.

I yanked her hand from under the faucet and didn't need more than a few moments to determine the source of the blood; she sliced the tip of her thumb pretty nicely, and it began oozing fresh crimson almost immediately.

"Shit, kid, what the hell were you doing?" I asked gruffly, holding her thumb under the faucet again, turning it to hot, and scrubbing the wound with soap. She shrieked at the sharp sting but I wasn't about to let it get infected.

I rinsed it well, turned off the water, and grabbed a yellow washcloth which I held against it firmly, eliciting another shriek from her.

"I know, kid, I know, just take it easy." I held the cloth against her thumb with one hand while I cleaned up the blood from the sink and rinsed my razor with the other. It was then that I remembered we didn't have any band aids. "Shit." I repeated, too preoccupied to remind her that she was never to use that word.

I removed the cloth as carefully as possible and inspected the flap of flesh that she nearly filleted off, deciding that if I cut strips from one of my shirts and wrapped them around her thumb, securing them in

place with tape, the wound should heal pretty well until I was able to get to a store to buy proper bandages.

To prevent the wound from bleeding again while I prepared the makeshift bandages I told El to go sit on the couch and continue holding the cloth to her thumb. She hurried over there immediately, clearly afraid that I was upset.

I decided to use one of my white shirts so I could see right away if the wound began to bleed again. Using a pair of old scissors that I sterilized in boiling water first, I cut several strips out of my shirt, one inch wide and about four inches long.

“Alright, lemme see.” I said, sitting next to her on the couch and taking her injured hand. She did a good job at stemming the blood flow, I saw as I peeled the cloth back to find a closed flap of skin with only dried blood surrounding it.

When my makeshift bandage was taped securely in place I sat back and admired my work. Then I noticed El swipe a hand quickly at her eyes, hoping I wouldn’t notice.

“Hey hey, why’re you cryin’?” I asked, frowning with concern.

She shrugged and then her lower lip began to tremble.

“Kid, I’m not mad, okay?” I said, placing a hand on the top of her head, which was just beginning to produce small curls at that point. “I know you’re curious about things, and it’s good to be curious, but you need to be careful, okay? Some things are dangerous.”

I took her good hand, then, and stood up, pulling her with me. “C’mom.”

We went back into the bathroom and I took the razor down from the high shelf I placed it on.

“So this is called a razor, alright? Do you know what it’s used for?”

El shook her head.

“Okay, so men use these to shave the hair on their face. Now, I

haven't used mine in a little while because I like having my beard, but if I wanted to get rid of my beard or my mustache, I'd use it like this," I demonstrated in the air near my cheek, "very, very carefully. If you use it the correct way it's very safe. Do you want to hold it?"

She shook her head and looked down at the floor.

"You sure? It's okay since I'm here. C'mon, kid, open your hand."

She shyly held her good hand open, palm up, and I placed the heavy metal handle of the razor in it. She looked uncomfortable with it, like she wanted nothing more than to put it down.

"See, you hold it by the handle so you don't cut yourself, okay?"

"Okay."

I was tempted to mention that I'll give her a lesson in shaving when she starts to grow hair on her legs, but I didn't want to alarm her or overload her with too much information, nor did I want her to feel like she was expected to shave if she didn't want to.

She handed the razor back to me, looking sullen.

"Want an Eggo?" I asked, hoping to cheer her up, not caring that she already brushed her teeth in preparation for bed.

She shook her head, still looking sad, so I tried to think of some other treat to offer her.

"What? No Eggo? Okay, how bout some ice cream?"

"No."

"Um..." I scratched my beard. "Want me to read to you?"

She shrugged, which was certainly more promising than a shake or a flat-out "no".

"Alright, kid. Get into bed and pick out a book and I'll be in in a minute, yeah?"

She nodded and padded out of the bathroom, and I took the opportunity to brush my own teeth while she got settled in bed.

I entered El's room where she lay in bed, the book she'd picked out resting on her lap. Little Women. I sat down in my chair and began to read.

Halfway through the first chapter she startled me by reaching a tiny hand up to my face and touching my beard.

Then she smiled. It was a tiny smile and only lasted a second, but it was enough. I chuckled.

"What're you doing, kid?"

"I like beard." She said matter-of-factly, petting my facial hair for a few more seconds before tucking her hand back under the blankets and closing her eyes, finally looking content.

Notes for the Chapter:

The cutting of the thumb is based on my own experiences. I was roughly four when I found my dad's razor in the shower and cut the shit out of my thumb. I don't remember much, just that I took a bathroom break while my dad read to me and my sister, I picked up his razor, there was lots of blood, and my dad was a mixture of worried and pissed. Fortunately it was not my thumb-sucking thumb.

6. Chapter 6

Day 250

I find her asleep on the floor of her room. She's in the corner next to the bookcase, curled up in the fetal position, her hand trapped in a chapter book that's laying next to her. She's still in her overalls, so I don't think she intended to fall asleep.

I cross the room and crouch down next to her, placing a hand on her back.

"Kid? Hey, kid?"

Her eyes flutter open and the corners of her mouth turn up in the slightest smile when she sees me.

"Hop?" She asks, so sleepy she sounds drunk.

"Yeah." I smile back, moving my hand to her head of curls. "Whatcha doin', kid?" I run my hand along her hair soothingly. "Your bed's over there."

"Hmm..." She closes her eyes and mumbles, freeing her hand from the book; her thumb finds her mouth like a heat-seeking missile.

"You fall asleep reading?"

Her eyes remain shut but she gives me a little nod, her cheek scraping against the area rug she's lying on. She exhales loudly through her nose, sucking her thumb with the contented ferocity with which Sarah would suckle from Diane.

"Alright, c'mere." I say as I stick my hands under her armpits and lift her into my arms. She whines at being moved but a second later buries her face in my neck for the short trip to her bed.

"Tired." She mumbles into my neck.

"Yeah, I know, but if you sleep all night on the floor you're gonna wake up really sore and cranky." I tell her as I lay her down on her

bed and help her curl back up into a ball. She immediately grabs Mr. Bear and then shoves her thumb back into her mouth. I sit on the edge of the bed and rub her back some more, debating whether or not I should make her get her pajamas on and brush her teeth.

“Hey, kid? Wanna get your PJs on?” I know what her answer, if I get one, is gonna be.

I don’t get one.

“Okay you don’t have to get your PJs on but you gotta brush your teeth, okay?”

Still no answer.

“Okay, I’ll let the PJs and teeth slide for tonight but you have to pee before you go to sleep, you know that.”

I rub her back some more, trying to rouse her as gently as I can.

“C’mon, kid, I know you’re sleepy but you gotta go pee so you don’t wet your bed. You don’t want to wet your bed, do you?” I pat her back. “El?”

It’s not often that I use her name, so she rolls over to face me and frowns. Tired and cranky. Then her frown turns to a pout and she whines, “Tired...”

“Yeah kid, I know. C’mon, I’ll help you into the bathroom. Up up, let’s go.”

She whines the whole way into the bathroom, all twenty feet. I undo her suspenders and leave her to take care of the rest; she continues to pout as I exit the bathroom, leaving the door ajar, as she prefers.

Apparently the two minutes it took her to use the toilet was enough to wake her up, so when I tap on the bathroom door five minutes later she’s placing her wet toothbrush back in the cup on the sink.

“Decided to brush your teeth? That’s my good girl.” I pat her head.

She nods in response. She’s still not a big talker but her lack of simple

words right now is a testament to how tired she is.

She walks into me, then, and rests her head on my upper belly. I give her a quick hug. "Alright, go on and get back into bed, okay, before you fall asleep right here."

"Read?"

"You want me to read you a chapter?" I rub a hand down my beard and glance at my watch. "I dunno, kid, it's awfully late...you're not too tired?"

I feel her shake her head against my belly. "Not too tired."

I sigh, resigning myself to the fact that I'll probably fall asleep in the chair and wake up with a sore neck. I have a hard time saying no to this kid, though, especially when she's being needy. "Okay. Just lemme get out of my work clothes and I'll be right in."

She's pulling her pajama bottoms up when I walk into her bedroom. I suspected she might decide that overalls aren't comfortable for sleeping. She crawls into bed and snuggles into her blankets, then grabs our book from its resting place next to her and hands it to me expectantly.

I lower myself into the bedside chair and take the book, finding the page I dog-eared and beginning to read.

7. Day 120

Day 120

I didn't take this kid into my life with the intention of her becoming my surrogate daughter. It's not like I was leaving Eggos in the woods because it was cheaper than an adoption agency or something. No, I took this girl into my life because of my immense feelings of guilt and because I couldn't sleep at night knowing she may indeed be alive and out there in the forest.

When I first began leaving the aforementioned Eggos in the box in the woods I told myself that if I were to find her (emphasis on the "if" - I've endured enough tragedy to know not to get my hopes up), I'd take her in, take care of her as an adult would a child that's not his.

I had no intention of becoming emotionally attached; she was just supposed to be a kid who I felt obligated to care for.

I wasn't supposed to be a full-fledged father again.

Though I suppose that's a pretty unrealistic expectation, I think, as I sit here on the couch with the girl sitting sideways on my lap, wrapped tightly in my arms.

A bright white flash illuminates the cabin and she whines. A colossal boom loud enough to rattle the windows follows it not two seconds later and she lets out a squeal, pushing her face into my neck.

I look at my watch. 2:23 AM. Why do the worst thunderstorms always occur in the middle of the fucking night?

She's got her arms around my neck and has tightened her grip with each subsequent flash and boom; I've responded by wrapping her more tightly in my own arms and rocking her slowly from side to side.

Her pajamas are damp with sweat, as she hid under her blankets for a considerable amount of time before she came into the living room

and climbed on top of me to wake me up.

She gasps at the next flash, and the thunder that follows in less than a second is so loud that I'm beginning to get a nervous feeling in the pit of my own stomach.

Christ, this is how forest fires start.

The skies finally open, then, as if god heard me, and sheets of rain begin lashing the windows, coming down so hard we can hear it pounding on the roof.

"You hear that, kid? The rain started, that means the storm will be over soon." I lie to her.

She doesn't acknowledge me. Instead she removes her arms from my neck and clasps her hands over her ears.

"too loud..." She wails, pressing her palms against her ears as firmly as she can.

Can't blame her. On top of the booming thunder and the wind, the rain whipping against the windows causes an almighty racket, as though our little cabin is a ship caught in a squall at sea.

Not to mention that this is likely the first storm she's experienced, having spent the first 12 years of her life imprisoned in the deep interior of a lab. To make matters even worse, I haven't yet had the chance to explain to her what lightning is or why thunder is so damn loud. I don't think I've explained a single thing about storms to her, despite the fact that we've entered spring thunderstorm season.

CRAAAACK!

Fuck, that was close.

The poor kid squeals again and I squeeze her tight and continue to rock her back and forth. "It's gonna be okay, El. Relax. Just relax, okay?"

"when will it stoooooop?" She whines, speaking into the crook where my shoulder and neck meet.

“Soon, kid, it’ll stop soon.”

“how soon?”

“Uh...pretty soon.”

Her breathing has become fast and shallow and I recognize the signs of hyperventilation quickly enough to stop it in its tracks.

“El, El, sweetheart, I’m right here, okay? I’ve got you, I’ve got you. I’m not gonna let anything happen to you.”

I place my hand on the side of her face and use it to hold her head to my shoulder. She still has her hands over her ears and I notice how cold her little fingers are. They’re like ice.

“scared.” She squeaks out.

“I know.”

“don’t like.”

“I don’t like, either. Just breathe, okay? We’re gonna be fine.”

I pat the couch cushion next to me, fumbling around for the remote control. I grab it and switch the television set on, relief washing over me when I notice the lack of an emergency broadcast scrolling at the bottom of the screen; a tornado warning would be a great way to traumatize the kid even more.

“Here we go, we’re gonna watch some TV until the storm’s gone by, okay?” I crank up the volume to drown out the racket from outside and bounce my knee a couple of times, hoping the slight jostle will distract her from her terror.

She wails again as a particularly fierce gust pelts rain against the windows, and her face crumples as her own waterworks finally begin.

“make it stop...” She sobs into my neck. “I hate it I hate it make it stop...”

“I can’t, El, but I promise it’ll be over soon.” I run my fingers through

her curly hair.

It takes about five more minutes but the storm finally begins to move on and the thunder, while still present, no longer shakes the entire cabin. El keeps her hands over her ears for another few minutes, just for good measure, then tentatively, cautiously removes them.

“I think the storm’s movin’ on, kiddo. See, I told you we’d be okay.”

She doesn’t answer me, instead sticking her left thumb in her mouth and sucking it with a look of worried determination on her face.

How could a man who once proudly held the title of Dad not fall right back into the role given the proper stimulus?

Though I have to wonder if I’d have felt the same way if she’d been a boy. If it had been a little boy who’d escaped from the lab that night and who’d helped us find Will before disappearing into a cloud of ashes.

I’d like to think I would, but deep down I think I was drawn to help this child because she’s a girl. Because I had a daughter, I lost a daughter, and I needed to fill that void with another daughter.

Once you’ve been father to a girl you view all other girls as helpless little things that need protecting. Even the ones who can crush your skull with their mind.

I give it a few more minutes, still rocking her from side to side and waiting until the only presence of the storm is the occasional distant flash.

“Ready to go back to your room?”

She shakes her head stiffly.

“No? Aren’t you tired?”

She considers this question for a moment before answering with a nod.

“But you don’t wanna go back to bed?”

“no.” She muffles around her thumb. Her head is still pillowed against my shoulder and she seems pretty content to stay put.

Okay, then. Guess we’re staying here for the night. Am I doing the right thing here by giving her what she wants? Am I spoiling her if I don’t make her go to bed? Are the rules of parenting different if the child you’re raising has been severely traumatized?

Typically parents are told that giving their kid whatever they want is a recipe for a spoiled child and an entitled adult. But does that rule apply here? If I deny this poor traumatized girl a cuddle because I selfishly want to go back to bed, could I be doing more harm than good?

I decide to play it safe. Sleep be damned.

So I turn the volume on the TV down a bit, loud enough to hear but no longer blaring to drown out the storm. From the occasional flutters of damp eyelashes against my neck, I can tell she remains awake for some time, though she’s fallen silent.

She’s not even watching the tube with me; I figured she’d at the very least turn her head a few degrees to the left so she could see the screen, but she remains in the same position, presumably staring blankly at my neck. It would seem that she’s trying to match her breathing to my own.

I wake up with a jolt. Shit. What time is it? Did I fall asleep? I lift my head from its resting spot on the back of the couch. The sun is just beginning to rise, peaking through the front windows.

El looks quite content, curled up on the couch in a ball, her butt and feet pressed firmly against my thigh. I give her back a quick rub, careful not to wake her, and stand up, stretching my arms. Ugh, what a night.

I shower and get dressed, and as I’m preparing breakfast the kid starts to stir. She lifts her head from the couch, her curls messy, and looks around, confused.

“Hop?” She asks.

“Go back to sleep, kid. I’ll wake you when breakfast’s ready.”

She mumbles something I can’t decipher and rolls over, snuggling against the cushions.

When breakfast is ready I decide not to wake her, opting to let her sleep longer while I eat.

I’m uneasy. I had the radio on low while I fixed breakfast, and the weather forecast is calling for scattered thunderstorms this afternoon. Granted, thunderstorms aren’t as frightening during the day as they are during the night, but I can’t see El making such a distinction. I briefly consider calling in sick, but decide against it, figuring I can check in on her at lunch if the skies are looking threatening.

Right before I head out I sit down on the couch next to her and rub her back.

“Rise and shine.” I say gently.

She groans and stretches and whines a bit. “hmm...you said could sleep more...” She complains.

“Yeah, but I gotta head out to work and need to talk to you for just a second, okay? We might get some storms this afternoon.”

She stiffens but I continue.

“Now they shouldn’t be as bad as they were last night because storms are scarier when it’s dark out. I’m gonna try to check in on you during my lunch break, but if you get scared just radio me, okay?”

“don’t like storms.”

“I know, me neither. Just be brave, okay? If we get a storm and I’m not home just turn on the TV or the turntable and try to distract yourself.”

El rolls over towards me.

“stay home?” She asks hopefully.

I sigh. “Kid, I wish I could. I really do. But I don’t think Flo is buying anymore of my excuses.” I ruffle her hair. “Just try to be brave for me, and I’ll get us some takeout for dinner. Deal?”

El hesitates, clearly not wanting to make such a deal, but she relents and gives a quiet “yes.”

“Good girl.” I pat her bottom. “Go back to sleep.”

I spend the entire drive to work simultaneously worrying about the forecast and wondering what I should get us for dinner. If I have time I’ll pick her up something else special, maybe a new puzzle or another teddy bear. Something to make her happy.

If we’re lucky, the forecast will be wrong, or maybe the storms will miss us entirely. I can only hope...

8. Chapter 8

Day 079

“Look at me.”

The girl refuses, choosing to look petulantly down at her hands.

“El? Eleven. Look at me, please.”

She does, slowly raising her eyes to meet mine. I rarely call her by her full name. I lean forward where I’m perched on the edge of the coffee table and gently takes both of her hands in mine.

“That’s better. Now. We. Do not. Hit.” I emphasize each word.

The brown eyes in front of me flit downwards again, staring sheepishly at my calloused fingers holding her own.

“El, I’m not mad at you, okay? I just want to talk. Now can you look at me, please?”

I let go of one hand so I can place my index finger under her chin and tilt her head up. Those brown eyes are now swimming with tears.

No no, please no tears. I can’t handle little girl tears; I always fall apart.

“No no, honey, no crying. You’re not in trouble, I promise. We just need to talk about what’s okay to do and what’s not okay...okay?”

The girl shrugs noncommittally and lets out a tiny whimper as a tear escapes her eye.

“Okay. Now. It’s not okay to hit people. I know you were upset that I was late getting home, but that doesn’t mean it’s okay to hit me. Do you understand? Hitting hurts.”

“but...”

“Yeah? Talk to me, kiddo.”

“but...” Her lower lip quivers.

“Take your time. Find your words.”

“but...I small. You big.”

“Yes, that’s true. I’m big and you’re small, and you only hit me on the arm so it didn’t really hurt. But, kid, that’s not the point. The point is that you were mad - and it’s okay to be mad - but instead of telling me with your words you lashed out. That’s not okay.”

El squeezes her eyes closed and several more tears drop from each one. She keeps opening and shutting her mouth, as though she wants to say something, but no words come out.

“Like I said, it’s okay to be mad. I get mad, too. Like when my deputy does something stupid. It’s normal for people to get mad. But how we deal with our anger or...or our disappointment at other people is very important. If Callahan annoys me I can’t just hit him. I might want to, but I know that it’s not okay to do. Is there a reason you were mad enough to hit me?”

The girl looks down at the floor and shakes her head vehemently, her curls bouncing.

“You sure?”

“I...”

“Yeah? You can tell me. Remember, I’m not mad.”

“when you come home late, no time.”

“No time for what?”

She swallows nervously. “read.”

“Read?” The gears are turning in my head. “Ohhhh, you mean the bedtime book.”

“eat and go to sleep. no book.”

Shit. She's right. No reason to hit me, of course, but I can see why it would upset her. Since I work five, sometimes six days a week, dinner and the bedtime book is usually our only time to bond. She also seems to sleep better on the nights I read to her. But if I get stuck working late I might not get home until 8:30, leaving little time after dinner to read to the kid.

"Okay. I'm sorry, kid. I can understand why that would make you upset. I like our reading time, too. Being the chief of police can be unpredictable. I wish I could be home at 5:15 everyday but sometimes it's just not possible. It doesn't mean it's okay to hit me, though. Do you understand?"

She pulls her feet up onto the couch and tries to curl in on herself, and I feel like even more of a bastard, even though I did nothing wrong. I grab one of her bare feet where it pokes out from under her and give it a little squeeze.

"El, I just want you to use your words next time, okay? Next time I'm late or you're angry at me for whatever reason, I want you to tell me how you're feeling instead of lashing out."

She sniffs. "bad."

"No no, you're not bad. Don't ever think that. Trust me, El, this is a talk that all children get from their parents. It's just that those children get taught not to hit when they're much younger. You didn't have a normal childhood, which is why you're not learning it until now."

I stand up from where I'm perched on the coffee table. "Scooch over." I sit next to her and she immediately curls into my side, hugging my left bicep. "You know you can always come to me about anything, right, El? Whatever feelings or thoughts you're having, you can always talk to me."

"yes." Her voice quavers just a bit but no longer sounds wet.

"Good. Now no more tears, okay? I know I look like a big man but the tears of little girls are my weakness."

She hugs my bicep tighter in response.

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry it's taken me so long to update my stories. I have too many of them and I tend to get them confused or just forget about them altogether. The idea for this chapter literally just popped into my head. It's short but hey, it's something, right?

Day 102

The kid has been having a string of bad nights this past week. Nightmares, restlessness, cold sweats, and waking up every few hours. The most recent development is anxiety around bedtime as well as not wanting to even get into her bed, which breaks my heart because no kid should ever be afraid of their own bed.

The night before last, after she was in her pajamas, she guilt-tripped me into watching another episode of The Greatest American Hero, and when I fell asleep on the couch, she laid a blanket over me and then went and curled up on my cot. When I awoke at 2 am to a full bladder and a stiff neck, I shuffled to the bathroom and on the way back, decided to plop back down on the sofa and let El spend the rest of the night where she was.

Then last night, not long after El was read to and tucked in and I was bundled up on my cot, the girl emerged from her bedroom and tried to climb into bed with me. I had gently admonished her, explaining that the cot was absolutely not built for two, and when she began to whine I got up and, as much as I hated having to do it, took her by the hand and marched her back to her room.

She lost it when I closed the door, sobbing and wailing, and I reopened it immediately to find her kneeling on her bed, a cascade of tears running down her red cheeks.

Jesus. What the hell was going on?

I went to her, sitting on the bed and letting her curl into my side. I rubbed her back and murmured soothing words, trying to encourage her to talk to me about what she was afraid of, but she was too upset for any coherent conversation.

That night I suggested a compromise - I'd sleep with her in her bed, just for that night, since it was big enough for two, if she'd talk to me in the morning about what was bothering her so much. She had nodded tearfully.

We laid down, and El immediately plastered herself against my side. She was calmer than she had been ten minutes prior, but she remained tense. Even with my eyes closed I could tell that her own remained open, flicking back and forth across the dark room. Her anxiety was palpable and I could practically feel her unsettled mind.

Briefly I wondered if there was something, other than her emotional health, that I should be concerned about. Was there something that she was sensing, either in her room, outside the cabin, or even on its way through the forest, about to find us? No. She would have told me.

She fell asleep sometime after one. I could tell from the way her body slackened and her breathing evened out. Only then was I able to get to sleep myself.

Now it's six am and I'm standing here at the stove, flipping pancakes and waiting for El to wake up, and wondering how I'm going to broach the subject of her bedtime issues without upsetting her.

Author's Note:

My headcanon is that, when Hopper found El in the woods, only about a month or so had passed (based on the length of her hair) and thus El isn't supposed to have matured physically as much as Millie Bobby Brown had between seasons. So in my head she's still as tiny as she was in season 1 when they first move into the cabin together.

Another note: the thing about Hopper's ex-wife only

relenting and allowing their child to suck her thumb once it became clear she was going to die wasn't intended as a slight against her. It was more to show that she was likely in denial at first about their daughter's diagnosis and/or wanted to put on a brave face for the kid, so she told herself and Sarah that she can't suck her thumb because she'll ruin her teeth.

I would like to use this opportunity to request similar fics from other writers. I love, love, love Hopper & El "first days together" fics, but unfortunately have (I think) read them all. I don't have a lot of faith in my ability to adequately convey their special relationship (I just don't think I'm a good writer, period) so I'm putting out a plea for the better writers out there to get to work on some amazing fics!